

## Charlie Brinkhurst Cuff's Claudia Jones' Memorial Lecture 2021



The majority of people here today will be journalists. And so, I'm going to assume you love storytelling just as much as I do and start this lecture with a story about someone very, very special.

This woman was glamorous, vivacious, and just slightly eccentric. She once slept on a bed made from books, of which she read voraciously. She had a personality that attracted people — it's been described to me as a magnetism. And she especially loved creating friendships with other women; the type of profound relationships you only come across once in a lifetime. She loved to go to parties, to drink and smoke and chat.

Very sadly, this woman had a fatal illness. But she didn't ever let it hold her back. One day, not long after she came to live in England, she had a spell in hospital and desperately needed someone to come and tend to her hair.

I've been told that Carmen England, one of the UK's first well-known Black hairdressers, was the woman for the job. This is a video of Carmen from that time period:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzV0XSQsmy4&ab\\_channel=BlackBritishArchives](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzV0XSQsmy4&ab_channel=BlackBritishArchives)

So, as you can see, she was an expert in hairdressing, and would have done this woman's hair fabulously. But although she was well used to the practicalities of tending to afro hair textures, Carmen was scared. She had heard that this woman was a Black communist, a radical — possibly she even knew that she'd been exiled from America.

But she pulled herself together, packed up her tools, probably a hot comb, and some of her own homemade hair products, and made her way to this woman's house.

And they immediately hit it off. They smoked up a storm, and they chatted and gossiped. The pair became such close friends that later down the line, they worked together on one of the first carnival organised by and for the Black community in London!

Their carnival, Caribbean Carnival, took place in the late 50s and early 1960s, in response to racist violence and riots that swept through Britain in the summer of 1958, and more specifically, the murder of Kelso Cochrane.

As you may have guessed, the woman I've been describing, the Black communist, exiled from America, who was glamorous, glorious, and so friendly, was Claudia Jones.

I tell you this story because I want to impress upon you the amount of joy Claudia was able to create in her relatively short life, and her understanding of how important it was for there to be spaces for both individual and collective joy to be found within the Black community in the UK.

As put by Claudia's biographer, Carole Boyce Davies: "Jones clearly felt that Caribbean traditions had much to offer the world in terms of creating a culture of human happiness over the ignorance and pains of racism, and indeed it was a people's culture that provided them with the basis for acquiring their freedom."

I believe that finding happiness, finding joy, as Black journalists must become a fundamental part of our practice — just as it was for Claudia Jones, who among other accolades, was a journalist & editor who created the West Indian Gazette.

Why would I say that? Let me explain exactly why.

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I recently had a conversation where someone said the following statement to me: "Joy doesn't sell newspapers." Joy. Doesn't. Sell. Newspapers. There are other more well-known phrases. "If it bleeds, it leads." Or, more simply, "Good news doesn't sell newspapers." And there is some evidence to support this idea.

In 2014, the Russian news site City Reporter only reported good news to its readers for 24 hours and reportedly lost two-thirds of its normal readership that day.

And there is plenty of psychological evidence, studies and so on, that point towards this idea of us being attracted to the morbid. There is a reason, of course, why True Crime journalism is so successful.

As put frankly by former Guardian columnist Roy Greenslade way back in 2007: “Peoples' interest in news is much more intense when there is a perceived threat to their way of life. They care much less about what happens around them when they enjoy relative peace and/or relative prosperity...”

He went on: “The regular calls for papers to publish ‘good news’ rather than bad is largely a waste of time. People are stimulated to read by the latter. They want to know what has gone wrong rather than what has gone right.”

Especially as Black journalists in the UK, we know that part of our role is convincing a white supremacist society to care about issues they normally wouldn't.

In the scenario laid out by Greenslade, this means we have a double disadvantage if and when we want to report on quote-un-quote “good” news. Because why would we bother to report “good” news if no-one cares, and contrarily, if we aren't doing the work to make people care about the bad news that affects us, who is?

We hold truth to power, especially when it comes to issues of racism and prejudice against people of marginalized backgrounds. As put by Lionel Morrison, the first black president of the NUJ, in his book *A Century of Black Journalism in Britain*, Black journalists have long thought of themselves as educators, and the Black press has always “served a vital political function”.

That means that our careers are often bound up out of necessity in the negative. And let me be clear, I do not think this is a bad thing. It is utterly necessary to have Black reporters working in this area of the media space — giving our unique perspective to tough, critical stories.

At present there aren't enough Black news and investigative reporters occupying key jobs. And you can tell when they are: just look at Rianna Croxford's excellent work at the BBC, and Nimo Omer's work at Tortoise.

But the problem is that culture, the arts, can be a site for reproducing oppression. It can be filled with stereotyping, and othering. And that extends to the media. As a report this week found, 59% of online articles in Britain associated Muslims or Islam with negative behaviour or qualities over course of a year. And last year, many Black journalists in the US spoke out about having to step away from the profession due to the burnout and trauma of reporting on Black death.

In a media environment that still sees almost all of the top editorial jobs, the positions of power, in the hands of a white elite, if not completely ignored, Black pain remains easy and accessible for the white gaze. It's consumable in its tragedy.

We saw this with how virulently images of murdered Black people were shared by media platforms in the 2010s, rarely with any kind of content warning. And now Black journalists like Kemi Alemoru are increasingly articulating the pain and awkwardness of the scenario. She wrote for gal-dem, while I worked there as editor-in-chief: "A white person might feel slightly bad about racism enough to retweet our final moments, but not to the extent that it will mean that they will become actively, let alone passionately anti-racist or particularly proactive in using their privilege in any constructive way."

Black pain, construed through the media in that way, does not always have an effective purpose. It doesn't necessarily always help hold truth to power. And, as many campaigners have been saying for years, it shouldn't take graphic video evidence for Black people to be believed.

We are encouraged to think about many things as journalists, but I bet it is very unlikely that anyone here has actively been encouraged by their bosses to find joy in their everyday work.

In fact, I bet that the only way in which you have been told to report on joyful stories is through the lens of 'fluff', and that that 'fluff' somehow tends to mainly apply to stories about certain types of people, like a certain captain last year. Black people aren't often given that licence, and on the rare occasions they are, it's through the lens of exceptionalism.

So, if we accept that a fundamental part of the media at this moment is capitalizing on Black pain without giving us space to exist outside those boundaries, how do we move forward? Do we believe that profit and intrigue are the driving forces behind journalism, or can we challenge that notion?

I think we can believe in the ethics and sensibilities of journalism strongly and still critique and analyse where we might be getting it wrong. Or even point out the hypocrisies in our current praxis when it comes to the lack of joy many journalists experience in their reporting and in their life outside of work.

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I've spent the past year working on a book called *Black Joy* and it's forced me to consider in more depth how I think about the news I consume and create as a journalist.

I am not a naturally joyful person — if anything the latter; I revel in journalistic morbidity like your favourite West Indian aunty and am highly critical of myself. I was recently on holiday with some friends where I was relentlessly made fun of due to how much I think and talk about death and aging.

But actively pursuing joy has opened up a whole new world for me and forced me to consider my public actions and my own happiness in a radically new way. I've learnt from figures like Claudia, but also women like Audre Lorde, an American writer, who said: "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers, which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."

As Lorde explains, while *Black Joy* can be individualised, to me it is also very much about collective experiences, and shared experiences — like Carnival, which is a particularly interesting example.

Through the work of an author and political activist called Barbara Ehrenreich, I learned that while the same elements come up in every human culture throughout history — a love of masking, carnival, music-making and dance — sixteenth-century Europeans began to view mass festivities as foreign and 'savage.'

Therefore, Black British collective joy is radical not just because we are not always able to access it amongst narratives of pain and oppression, but because in European society, it's been suppressed for hundreds of years. Our existence, our "imported" collective joy, as inspired by Claudia's Caribbean Carnival, is two fingers in the face of their notions of savagery: not just in the Caribbean context, but explicitly in the European context.

As our ancestors knew, as Claudia knew, without joy, our work becomes unsustainable and plays into the hands of our oppressors. Carnival, and especially Claudia Jones' iteration of it, was explicitly about joy as resistance. So, when we look at it the issue of whether or not joy can be used to "sell" newspapers, via this framework, to reduce the argument to a false dichotomy of "bad" and "good" news seems sloppy.

Maybe our job is to think more deeply about how we can encourage people to consume joy. I personally don't have all the answers... but I do have a lot of questions that I'd like your help to answer. Are Black journalists engaging in the work of seeking joy in their life outside of journalism? Are they being given many opportunities to build joy into their practice in unexpected ways? Can finding joy, as mundane or cheesy as it may sound, become part of our practice because we know that without it, our work cannot sustain in the long-term without damage to ourselves and our audiences?

My initial thoughts are that if we are journalists because we care, which we are, we need to challenge ourselves to innovate, together, around this crucial issue. To bring it into curriculums and everyday newsroom conversations. In this current moment, where we've seen a mass awakening of a Black consciousness, let's stimulate people to read news of all forms.

It's not about producing less of the so-called "bad" news, unless that bad news is actively oppressive. As I said earlier that work is critically, crucially important. But I *\*think\** it's about making sure the work we do is always connected to a higher purpose, balancing the scales, and reflecting on the internal work we need to do to bring ourselves joy.

For me, firstly, that's looked like naming and defining my understanding of Black joy and imbuing it into some of the pieces I've recently edited. But for you it could mean something entirely different.

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To recap, like Claudia Jones, the woman with the big heart, who laughed a lot, who was messy and slept on a bed made from books, who brought joy to those around her and sought it out too, we must look for joy as a form of resistance and resilience as we continue our vital work.

Without joy, our work becomes unsustainable and plays into the hands of our oppressors. As Black journalists we aren't just responsible for the journalism we produce, we also must build the narrative story we want to talk about Black journalism as a praxis.

Ultimately, we have a responsibility to the younger generation of Black journalists, and to readers at large, not to ignore the realities of the world and their nuances, but to examine and re-examine how our frameworks and focuses impact the world around us.

If we all accept that journalism doesn't and shouldn't merely reflect people's anxieties and fears but can actively cause harm if wielded by the corrupt and powerful, we must also accept that a focus on Black joy would be of benefit to society.

If we abandon our ability to find joy in the world, we abandon our politics and our identities. We are Black journalists, and we CAN be, bring and bathe in the joys of our existence and of this horrible, delightful world we find ourselves in. Looking for joy could help to bring nuance to our journalism and solace to our souls.

Video of the event: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG\\_GlIcHISc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vG_GlIcHISc)